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ABSTRACT

An acting teacher can train students to bring the reality of their personal lives to the various artificial structures that give form to playscripts and that can otherwise induce rigid or mechanical performances if not balanced by the vibrancy of the actor. A series of exercises allows students to discover how they may use their own impulses, responses, and past experiences to bring immediacy, spontaneity, and authenticity to the structure of memorized language. The exercises integrate improvisation into a training program not as an end in itself, but as a means toward making a student a better actor. The exercises also facilitate the transition between improvisations and scene work, moving students from improvisations that are designed to free a personal responsiveness to inner impulses toward maintaining the same freedom of personal responsiveness within the structure of a memorized scene. Students can be led through exercises that begin with physical warm-ups, to games like "follow-the-leader" and "here and now" word game, to open scene dialogues in which students learn that there is no one way a line should be read, and, finally, to memorized dialogue. (AEA)

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# THE USE AND ABUSE OF IMPROVISATION IN ACTOR TRAINING

A paper delivered by Douglas C. Sprigg at the Speech Communication Association convention in Minneapolis on November 3, 1978.

## ESTHETICS OF ACTING

Before demonstrating certain uses I make of exercises and improvisations in teaching acting, I need to say a few things about the esthetics of acting and the function of improvisation. Most of us would agree that actors must bring their own personality to the role being performed. They must bring their reality as people to the artificiality of the text. Viewed in this way, acting, as it reflects the needs of the person and the needs of the text, may be seen to fluctuate between the chaos of authentic but totally unstructured human behavior at one extreme, and the rigidity of a totally structured artifice at the other. Actor as madman versus actor as con man. Most would agree that good acting involves some mixture of these two, some mixture of unplanned, spontaneous impulses on one hand, and calculated structured artifice on the other.

I believe it is Grotowski who uses the image of a candle within a glass enclosure. The rigid, inflexible glass suggests the structured, unchanging aspects of the role ( the memorized lines, the blocking, the demands of character and situation, etc.), the 'score' as Grotowski calls it, those elements of performance that structure the role and are repeated from night to night with little or no variation. But within that glass is the flame, which is always changing, always fluctuating, always alive to the slightest stimulus from the outside. The protean flame suggests the actor as a person within the role: the spontaneous, unpredictable, impulsive aspects of human behavior that give life to the rigid, inflexible structure of the score.

In my teaching of beginning acting, I have found it much easier to teach students to create structure than it is to get them to bring life to that structure. Many beginners come to acting with the idea that, to be a good actor, they have to become something other than they are. Whereas I try to convince them that to be a good actor, they first have to be themselves more fully than ever before. "But what about the character?" they ask. I try to convince them that what they call characters don't exist as people, but are only words upon a page, and for a personality to come to life onstage, they must bring to those words their own reality as a person. And more importantly, I try to convince them that their own uncalculated behavior, in all its complexity, is far more interesting than any idea they may have about how the character behaves. Their performance will be richer to the extent that they release their own behavior, and improverished to the extent that they try to illustrate an idea they have about a character's behavior. This concept is central to all my teaching of acting.

Charles Marowitz has written that, "The indulgent actor presents himself regardless of dramatic intent, while the talented actor molds himself to the

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dramatic intent." Now in some ways, this appears to contradict what I have just been saying. But in the very next sentence, Marowitz goes on to assert, "The crime is not acting oneself, but not having enough of oneself to act." The important idea here, it seems to me, is that we as human beings have within us the capacity to experience anything humans are capable of experiencing; and, therefore, if we can release our full capacity to experience, we will have more of ourselves accessible to bring to whatever the character experiences. Starting from this premis, my teaching of beginners concentrates upon freeing the actor's personal behavior, so there will be more of that person available to bring to the role. And of course the major tools for freeing a personal responsiveness are various kinds of exercises and improvisations.

## FUNCTION OF IMPROVISATION

I will speak of an improv as any activity that imposes a structure upon some aspects of the actor's behavior and allows other aspects to express themselves in a, more or less, free and unrestricted manner. For example, the standard improvisation freezes the "Who, What, and Where" (to use Viola Spolin's terms), and within that structure allows actors the freedom to use whatever language they desire. "You are an old wino at a bus stop trying to beg money from the people who are waiting for the bus." Within these conditions, the actor is free to use any language that is appropriate. Of course, it is equally possible to free or restrict different combinations of these elements. The student could be told, "You must recite the 23rd psalm at a bus stop." Here the language is fixed, the location (or "Where") is fixed, but the objective (or "What"), and the character (or "Who") are left open. The value of an improv derives from the opportunity it provides students to learn to free their personal behavior within the various kinds of restricting structures that acting places upon that behavior. And, although herein lies the great value of improvs, nevertheless, there is a certain danger involved.

## ABUSES OF IMPROVISATIONS

In my experience, the most common abuse of improvs in the classroom results from students treating an improv as a performance, rather than as a process of exploration. If students are allowed to concentrate upon producing a result rather than exploring a process, they will tend to make calculated, and thus artificial alterations in their behavior. Instead of liberating authentic responses, the improv will encourage a special kind of phoniness, a facile inventiveness, usually designed to impress or amuse the audience rather than to solve a problem. In its worst form, such improvs have the glib fatuousness of a Johnny Carson skit. When I first started teaching, I often tried using open-ended improvs just to loosen the students up. But I found that with great regularity some student would come out with a line like, "Oh, your teeth are like stars, they come out at night." The whole class would laugh, and the student would come away feeling he was a great

success, while his partner would feel like a failure. And so the improv produced a result that was exactly the opposite of the result I had intended.

Yet even if students are not trying to be cute, if they nevertheless are executing an intellectual decision they have made about how to respond, rather than simply responding, the results will be stilted and cliched. Used with discretion, improvs can help actors to discover within themselves unplanned impluses and unplanned responses, can help them to make a leap into the unknown, to surprise themselves with discoveries of things they might never have considered on an intellectual level. But used indiscriminantly, improvs can foster the very artificiality they are designed to prevent.

## USES OF IMPROVISATION

I have no doubt that there are an unlimited number of positive uses of improvs in actor training, and I'm sure each of us has developed our own improvs to deal with the particular problems of particular students. But I am committed to the idea that any improv or exercise, however useful, needs to be integrated into a program of training so that both student and teacher understand how it is designed to fulfill their mutual goal of making the student a better actor. I say this because I have seen both students and teachers fall in love with improvisation as an end in itself. I have seen students who become extremely proficient at improvising, but who are unable to transfer the skills they have learned to a memorized text. Because of this problem, I have tried to develop a program of exercises that will facilitate the transition between improvs and scene work.

## OUTLINE OF ACTING PROGRAM

As I have suggested, my first goal in teaching beginning actors is to break down the barriers to a free and open personal responsiveness. Then, I try to train the actors to maintain that free responsiveness within the increasing amounts of restricting structure they will encounter in the written script.

1. The first group of exercises and improvs are designed to free a personal responsiveness to <u>inner impulses</u>. Here I use a lot of physical exercises to remove tension and promote relaxation. In addition, I use exercises from Gestalt Therapy and other sources to put actors more in touch with the kind of impulses they might have.

2. Next I use improvs and exercises to free personal responsiveness to <u>physical space and physical objects</u>.

3. A third unit works on freeing personal responsiveness to <u>other people</u>.

This work takes up a bit more than the first third of the beginning acting class, and there still has been no attempt to introduce any imaginary circumstances. The goal has been to free impulses and to free responsiveness.

The question then becomes, what is the first structure to place on this unstructured behavior? Most teachers I have worked with tend to use the standard improvisation in one of its many forms: the students are asked to imagine a "Who, What, and Where" and then are encouraged to improvise their own language. But in my experience, I have discovered that I get better results if I first introduce the structure of language, and within that structure encourage students to explore their natural impulses and responses.

4. Therefore, the fourth unit of my program is designed to free personal responsiveness within the structure of both improvised and memorized language.

5. The fifth unit is designed to free personal responsiveness within the structure of objectives. This, by the way, is the first time the student is asked to imagine something that is not literally true within the acting situation.

6. The next unit adds the structure of situation and locale.

7. Then the structure of weather and physical states.

8. Then the structure of a narrative context. This is the first time I use the traditional improv, because I find that by this time the students are ready to adapt to the structure without becoming cute and glib.

9. Finally, I encourage students to maintain the same freedom of personal responsiveness within the structure of a memorized scene.

DEMONSTRATION

Using the following exercises, I will demonstrate some of the ways I try to get beginning students to maintain this freedom of personal responsiveness within the limitations imposed by the structure of language. I will focus upon this group of exercises because I feel improvisations with language are often neglected in an actor's training, and because I feel it is important to introduce students to using language before asking them to improvise within the other kinds of structures found in playscripts.

1. WARM-UP: Students begin by yawning and stretching, allowing a natural vocal sound to accompany the movement. This procedure is repeated at intervals throughout the warm-up as a way of releasing any residual or recurring physical and vocal tension. Next, starting from either the head or the feet, any of a series of stretching, shaking, or massaging exercises may be used to induce sensitivity and to release tension. The warm-up is concluded by jiggling or "throwing away" various parts of the body "on sound," as if trying to jiggle or throw away

the sound through the body part. As Kristin Linklater explains in her book Freeing the Natural Voice, this procedure is designed to integrate sound and movement so that they become naturally reciprocal responses.

2. FOLLOW-THE-LEADER: As a continuation of the warm-up, and as a transition to subsequent exercises, the simple game of follow-the-leader is particularly effective. When used with two people, one person initiates some simple movement and non-verbal sound, and the other person immediately repeats the same sound and movement. As a variation of the basic exercise, the follower alternates between repeating the same sound and movement and responding with a different sound and movement of his own. The purpose of this variation is to encourage the follower to be as spontaneous and free from self-criticism when responding as he is when merely imitating.

   Other variations involved changing the content of the exchange. For a period of time the leader's sounds and movements may be totally impulsive or may be guided by different images (images of animals, machines, colors, etc.), but eventually the leader starts using letters, words, phrases, and sentences as his sounds. Once again, the follower is encouraged to alternate between repeating the word or phrase of the leader and responding with a word or phrase of his own. As before, the alternation between repeating and responding is designed to encourage the student to abandon the security of a planned response by forcing him to respond instantaneously. Eventually the follower stops the repetitions entirely, and both students continue using language to respond to each other in the immediacy of the present moment, discovering unplanned impulses and unplanned responses to the images and intentions imbedded in the language they speak.

3. HERE AND NOW WORD GAME: This exercise is based upon one that, I believe, was first used by Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Two people face each other and, as in follow-the-leader, one speaks and the other follows, repeating what his partner has said. The difference in this exercise is that what the leader says must reflect his own thoughts, feelings, impulses, awarenesses as they exist in the "here and now." The leader is directed to focus his awarenesses on himself, or on the other person. Thus it is appropriate for the leader to say, "Here and now I'm aware that I'm nervous, my right shoulder is stiff, I'm resisting looking at you, I feel like "I'm going to laugh," or to say, "Here and now I'm aware you are smiling, yet you seem tense, I wonder what you are thinking, What did that expression mean?" But it is inappropriate to focus on things outside the present interaction, saying things like, "I wonder whether it is still raining, This room is cold, I've got a test later today, How did you do on that last paper?" These responses avoid what is going on between the two people in the present moment. As in follow-the-leader, the follower is instructed to start by following, but eventually to begin alternating between following and responding, and finally to do nothing but respond. In this way, the students are induced to follow their impulses and express their responses so that impulse and language become inseparable. When successful, the exercise prevents notions of social impropriety from intervening and censoring the response. The world does not fall apart when the students say what they really think, when they respond with what they really feel.

4. THE OPEN SCENE: Once students have learned to reflect their real impulses and responses in their own language, it is necessary to train them to reflect their real impulses and responses in language that is given to them. One effective means of accomplishing this objective is to use the Open Scene in one of its many variations. On the simplest level, one person may be given the words "please" and "thank you" while the other person is given the words "no" and "alright." They are then directed to respond to each other, as they did in the Here and Now Word Game, out of real impulses and real responses. The danger of course is that they will allow the language to draw them into an argument that has nothing behind it, one person screaming "please," the other "no," without either knowing what is being asked for and denied. It is essential that such behavior be discouraged at the outset. The students must constantly be reminded that at this point in their training the goal is to continue responding truthfully to each other as they did in the Word Game and to resist any attempt to produce the result they believe the language demands. Because all language tends to suggest how it should be spoken, the language in the Open Scene should be as neutral as possible. The following is a suggested example.

A: Are you alone?
B: Yes. Is there something I can do?
A: No. I don't think so.
B: How are you feeling?
A: Okay, Okay.
B: Good.
A: Will I see you in the morning?
B: Maybe. At this point I'm not sure.
A: Okay. Well, goodnight.
B: Yeah. Goodnight.

Initially, students should be asked to repeat the first two lines over and over again just to explore the possibilities of communication that can result when two people are really responding to each other. Finally, character A may move on to his next line while character B keeps repeating his first line so as to explore the possibilities for communication within those two lines. This pattern should be continued throughout the scene. As a result of this approach, the students learn that there is no one way a line should be read, and that the reading of the line should be determined not so much by the line itself as by what is coming from the person to whom the line is being directed. The student learns to free himself from the tyranny of language, learns to allow his personal responses to express themselves even within the structure of memorized language.

5. MEMORIZED MONOLOGUE: Working with a memorized monologue is the final step in the process of learning to improvise within the structure of language. Even when no other character is being addressed, a monologue will have much more life if the actor remains responsive to the possible questions of an imagined audience. The student learns this when he is asked questions about a memorized monologue that he must answer using only the words he has memorized. If the monologue begins, "When the rain came, we rushed inside," he might be asked, "Did you really rush inside? How wet did you get? Were you cold? Was there any lightning?" In trying to respond to these questions using only the single sentence or parts of that sentence,

the student learns that a monologue may not be simply an expression of inner thoughts and feelings, but also a series of responses to the imagined questions of an imagined audience.

Up to this point, I have emphasized the importance of the student learning to allow his response to external influences determine how he will speak a memorized line of dialogue. But it is equally important that the student's personal response to the language itself be reflected in his speaking of the line. As a way of encouraging this personal response, I ask the student to write out and memorize the description of some past experience that has had a strong emotional impact upon him. He then is asked to repeat the memorized description several times, each time trying to have a clearer visualization of the experience expressed by the words. Because the images that express the experience are connected with real memories and evoke real feelings, the student discovers the intimate connection between language, image, experience, memory, and emotion. Although similar to an "emotional memory" exercise, this procedure differs in that it teaches the actor to discover a great variety of emotional responses even within the rigid structure created by words that must be memorized and spoken over and over again without variation. This is an important first step prior to approaching a memorized monologue from a play.

In approaching a monologue from a play, the actor must reverse this process. Rather than writing down and memorizing words that reflect a personal experience, the actor must connect some personal experience to words that have already been written down by the playwright. One way of achieving this objective is to use an extreme form of the procedure known as "personalization" developed by Peter Kass at New York University. The actor is asked to make everything he says in the monologue mean something that is true about himself. If, as in the previous example, the monologue begins, "When the rain came, we rushed inside," the actor will be asked to remember a time in his own life when he actually rushed in out of the rain. He will be asked to describe in detail the entire experience until many images and feelings flood in upon him. He will then be asked to describe that experience using the memorized words from the play. As the words begin to express images and feelings that touch deep responsive chords within the actor, the entire speech takes on a new vitality and authenticity.

An intriguing aspect of this approach manifests itself when the actor must speak about something that has never happened to him. "When I was ten, I killed my mother." In such a case, the actor is encouraged to think of and describe some way in which he may have metaphorically killed his mother. As before, he is encouraged to explore, in what may be painful detail, some way in which those words say something about his own life, say something about his own relationship with his mother. Rather than trying to enact his idea of what it must be like for someone to kill a parent, an overly analytical approach that tends to produce superficial and self-conscious performances, the actor expresses something crucial from his own experience that resonates with authentic anger, fear, guilt, and remorse. He does not simply illustrate the dilemma of the character, he experiences it for everyone to see.

## CONCLUSION

As stated at the outset, my goal as a teacher of acting is to train students to bring the reality of their personal lives to the various artificial structures that give form to playscripts, but which, if not balanced by the vibrancy of the actor, can induce rigid or mechanical performances. The series of exercises I have outlined allow students to discover how they may use their own impulses and their own responses and their own past experiences to bring immediacy, spontaneity, and authenticity to the structure of memorized language.